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SUBJECT: SERBIA/MONTENEGRO AMBASSADOR'S VIEWS ON RELATIONS  
WITH ITALY, POSSIBLE MONTENEGRIN REFERENDUM

Classified By: Classified by Gabriel Escobar, Political Officer, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

1. (C) Summary. On November 8, Poloff met with Amb. Darko Uskokovic, Serbia/Montenegro Ambassador to Italy to discuss his views on the bilateral relationship between SaM and Italy and a possible Montenegrin referendum for independence. Uskokovic, a politically-appointed Ambassador who is close to Montenegrin PM Djukanovic, stated that one of his priorities as ambassador in Italy would be to ensure "proper" Montenegrin representation in the bilateral relationship and to work to allay Italian fears of an independent Montenegro. End summary.

2. (C) On November 8, Poloff met with Uskokovic at his request to discuss the current political situation in the Balkans. Uskokovic is an influential member of the ruling Montenegrin DPS party and staunch supporter of Montenegrin independence. Uskokovic stated that he agreed to leave his position as Montenegrin Minister of Economy to become SaM ambassador to Italy after a Montenegrin leadership decision to populate the central government institutions in Belgrade with competent, pro-independence figures from Montenegro. This policy marks a departure from a long-standing Montenegrin policy of ignoring the central government or using it as a place to exile those who had passed their political prime. Central to this policy was a goal of sending pro-independence ambassadors and deputy chiefs of missions to key Western nations. Uskokovic noted that his first priority will be to ensure that his staff gives an accurate and balanced view of the political situation in SaM, including the view that "Montenegro has the democratic right to vote on its future status."

3. (C) Uskokovic claimed that despite his personal interest in seeing Montenegro become independent, he will continue to defend the interests of the central government. He added, however, that he hoped that he could help overcome opposition to potential Montenegrin independence. His efforts will focus on three themes:

- To dispel the notion that Montenegro is a crime-exporting entity and a haven for smugglers. "We live in a bad neighborhood," he added, pointing out that Bosnia, Kosovo, Albania and Serbia have similar or worse crime problems than Montenegro. The Montenegro leadership was puzzled as to why the US and EU believed that the current union created better conditions to fight organized crime than an independent Serbia and independent Montenegro.

- To allay fears that an independent Montenegro would become an economically failed state. Montenegro gains no economic benefit from Serbia, he stated, and Montenegro gets no transfer payments, subsidies or food and fuel discounts from Serbia. The current plan of the Montenegrin leadership would be to propose a union of independent states that would provide for freedom of movement, goods, labor, and capital. The only difference, he said, would be voting rights. The US and EU should not fear a population displacement or economic disruption caused by a declaration of Montenegrin independence.

- To urge Italian leaders to avoid linking a Montenegrin referendum to Kosovar independence. International pressure to keep Montenegro from holding a referendum will not decrease Kosovar Albanian demands for independence. Similarly, keeping Montenegro would be a poor "consolation prize" for Serbian leadership in the wake of Kosovar independence.

4. (C) Uskokovic plans to urge GOI interlocutors to look more closely at the unstable Serbian political situation. The current Serbian leadership is so fragile that it cannot afford to take any decisions at all regarding the status of the union, combating organized crime, or making painful economic reforms. "In the end, this is not leadership," he stated, questioning whether the US and EU wanted to preserve the current government at the cost of future stability. He agreed that the a shift to a Radical Party government or a coalition that included the SRS would be a serious setback, but the US and EU needed to be more imaginative in finding ways to advance the transatlantic agenda than by stifling the

democratic processes in Kosovo and Montenegro.

15. (C) When asked about a possible postponement of a Montenegrin referendum from the spring of 2006 to the fall of 2006, Uskokovic noted that he believed the DPS would not want to risk losing momentum during local election campaigns, which he insisted were more important to the current coalition than the 2006 parliamentary elections. Djukanovic, in his view, would be more responsive to the pressures of his own party to hold a referendum sooner rather than later than he would be to pressure from the Contact Group.

16. (C) Comment: Uskokovic's comments are a reiteration of the same line that the Djukanovic government has pressed for the last 7 years. Although there may be some validity to Uskokovic's arguments, they are unlikely to convince the Italians to drop their opposition to an early referendum in Montenegro.

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